

DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES

Communicable Disease Control

Pertussis (whooping cough)

What is Pertussis?

Pertussis, or whooping cough, is one of the most deadly diseases of infants and young children. It is a highly contagious disease involving the respiratory tract (throat and lungs). It is caused by a bacteria that is found in the mouth, nose and throat of an infected person. Ten to 30 cases reported each year in Montana.

Who gets pertussis?

Pertussis can occur at any age. Seventy-five percent of reported cases occur in children under one year of age.

How is pertussis spread?

Pertussis is primarily spread by direct contact with discharges from the nose and throat of infected individuals. It is usually spread through the air by coughing or sneezing. Frequently, older siblings who may have the bacteria in their nose and throat, bring the disease home and infect an infant in the household.

What are the symptoms of pertussis?

Pertussis usually begins as a mild upper respiratory infection. Initially, symptoms resemble those of a common cold, including sneezing, runny nose, low-grade fever and a mild cough. Within two weeks, the cough becomes more severe and is characterized by episodes of numerous rapid coughs followed by a crowing or high pitched whoop. A thick, clear mucus may be discharged by coughing. These episodes may continue or recur for one to two months, and are more frequent at night. Older people or children who have received some pertussis vaccine generally have milder symptoms.

How soon after infection do symptoms appear?

The incubation period is usually five to ten days but may be as long as 21 days.

When and for how long is a person able to spread pertussis?

A person can transmit pertussis from seven days following exposure to three weeks after the onset of coughing episodes. The period of communicability is reduced to between five and seven days when antibiotic therapy is begun.

Does past infection with pertussis make a person immune?

One attack usually confers prolong immunity.

What are the complications associated with pertussis?

Complications of pertussis may include severe brain damage, convulsions, pneumonia, middle ear infection, loss of appetite, dehydration, apneic episodes (period when one cannot breath) and death.

What is the vaccine for pertussis?

The vaccine for pertussis is usually given in combination with diphtheria and tetanus. The American Academy of Pediatrics and the Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices recommends the DtaP (diphtheria, tetanus, acellular pertussis) vaccine be routinely given at two, four, six and 15-18 months of age and with an additional dose given between four and six years of age.

What can be done to prevent the spread of pertussis?

The single most effective control measure is having children less than seven years of age immunized on schedule and maintaining the highest possible level of immunization in the community. Treatment of cases with certain antibiotics can shorten the contagious period. People who have or may have pertussis should stay away from all young children and infants until properly treated and they are no longer infectious which may be 5-7 days after treatment.